

# Is There Any Solid Evidence For Expanding Compulsory School Age?

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Policy and law often go well beyond anything plain research evidence shows to the people, to researchers, and to legislators. Lowering and raising a state's compulsory school age is a good example of this fact. Numerous state legislatures have grappled with whether to expand state-compelled school ages, while many have not.

## Lowering the Compulsory Age

It is undeniable that definite *benefits* of lowering the compulsory school age and various early childhood education (ECE) programs for the general public of children are *not to be found*. That is, research does not clearly show any overall benefits for children in general. Some scholars would say that the effects of formal ECE efforts and lowering the compulsory age are ambiguous because some studies show short-term and some show long-term benefits for low-income or "disadvantaged" children, while other studies do not. Other scholars would say the benefits of ECE efforts and lowering the compulsory age are plain – that is, it is clear that there are no clear benefits. Overall, the body of research on the topic does not show benefits for the general population of children.

Here is one simple example of a key finding that contradicts what many legislatures and policy makers are doing. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported the following:

This "Head Start Synthesis Project" reviewed over 210 reports of research on the effects of local Head Start programs and found that Head Start results in **"significant, immediate gains in cognitive test scores, socioemotional test scores, and health status, (though) in the long-run, cognitive and socioemotional test scores of former Head Start students do not remain superior to those of disadvantaged children who did not attend Head Start"** [emphasis in the original].<sup>1</sup>

Several careful searches by this author have not unearthed any summaries or reviews of research or noteworthy single studies that substantiate the claim that lowering the compulsory school age will substantively or statistically improve the short-term or long-term academic or social lives of children in general in the U.S. or in any state in particular.

## **Raising the Compulsory Age**

Is there any research evidence to support raising the compulsory school age? Searches by this author for such studies have found little to nothing that supports raising the compulsory age.

A very recent literature search revealed a recent report with the title, *Compulsory School Attendance Age: The Case for Reform* that claimed the compulsory age should be raised.<sup>2</sup> The presentation is typical of such report. The authors fail, completely, in making a case that supports their claim that the compulsory school age should be raised. Their section entitled "Important Research and Reports Related to Compulsory School Attendance" cites only three items. One is in a journal, one is an unpublished "working draft" of a paper, and one is an in-house publication of an assumed research organization. Apparently, the strongest statistic the authors can cite is that only one-fourth of "... potential dropouts remains in school because of compulsory schooling laws." No research findings are cited that this is verifiable and no research is cited that of these 25 percent any more graduated or did better in life as adults. This kind of support for claims to raise the compulsory age is, from a research perspective and simply put, ludicrous.

Where is the clear research evidence that the state compelling teenagers to attend school for more years will cause them to learn or do better in life? If it existed, it seems that advocates of expanded compulsory age would produce simple, clear research showing this.

Furthermore, research and experience show that a parent or a state might be able to force 17- and 18-year-olds to attend classes in a school, but neither the state nor parent can force them to learn their academic subjects or have better attitudes toward academic learning.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The author has been a university professor at the graduate and undergraduate levels teaching courses on research methodology, statistics, and science teaching and a classroom teacher in public and private schools. He has been doing basic research and analysis for about 25 years. He has often followed research and debates on whether ECE and lower compulsory school ages and higher compulsory school ages enhance children's lives during their school years or into adulthood.

The author has been distressed to see that although there is no clear evidence that the myriad ECE programs, younger compulsory school attendance ages, and older compulsory school ages help children in general in any appreciable and consistent long-lasting way into their youth or adulthood, many uninformed politicians and policymakers, and educators and other businesses with vested interests in ECE programs and expanded compulsory school attendance ages, continue to promote the state expanding compulsory ages and funding ECE programs.

There must be, from a research perspective, at least two things in place in order to support the claim that the state compulsory school age should be expanded. First, there would have to exist multiple studies showing a correlation – that is, just a mathematical relationship or pattern – between special early childhood education programs or academic instruction for younger children or compelled longer stays in school for young adults for the general population and long-term positive effects into adulthood. Second, then the research would have to be designed

in such a way as to show a cause-and-effect relationship between these programs for younger children and compelled attendance for young adults for the population in general. Neither of these conditions exists in the body of research to date.

Finally, and also from a researcher's training in logic, even if the two aforementioned research conditions existed, then a legislative body would have to debate two more important factors. First, they would need to discuss whether a state's constitution demands that the state compel younger children and older young adults to attend school against the choices of their parents, or whether the constitution simply compels the state to offer or provide schools to the children of those who choose to use them. Second, the legislators would have to debate whether compelled or forced attendance at school is philosophically correct in a state that has a tradition of highly valuing the freedom of choice among its people.

In conclusion, no legislator should promote the expansion of state-compelled school attendance ages unless (1) there is solid and consistent research that supports a cause-and-effect relationship between expanded compulsory school age and long-term benefits for children into adulthood, and (2) such an expansion of compulsory school age by the state is consistent with the state's constitution and the spirit and history of freedom of choice in his or her state.

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### About the Author

Brian D. Ray is an internationally-known scholar who earned his Ph.D. in science education from Oregon State University, his M.S. in zoology from Ohio University, and his B.S. in Biology from the University of Puget Sound. He has been a professor of science and education at the undergraduate and graduate levels, has been a classroom teacher in both public and private schools, and has taught homeschool students. Dr. Ray does research and speaking internationally and provides expert testimony to legislators and in courts that focuses on educational issues, with an special emphasis on homeschooling (home-based education, home education, home schooling) research and pedagogy. Dr. Ray is currently president of the nonprofit National Home Education Research Institute in Salem, Oregon, U.S.A. ([www.nheri.org](http://www.nheri.org)).

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services. (1990, March 29). *Head Start: What do we know about what works?* Retrieved February 19, 2009 online  
<http://aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/reports/headstar.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Bridgeland, John M., Dilulio, John J., Jr., & Streeter, Ryan. (2007, circa; not dated). *Compulsory school attendance age: The case for reform*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises, LLC. Retrieved February 19, 2009 from  
<http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED503356>.